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Some Observations and Questions Regarding
Early Christian Architecture in Thessaloniki



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Π Ρ Ο Λ Ο Γ Ο Σ

Ἡ Ἐφορεία Βυζαντινῶν Ἀρχαιοτήτων Θεσσαλονίκης πέραν τοῦ καθημερινοῦ καθήκοντος τοῦ ἐντοπισμοῦ καὶ τῆς ἀποκάλυψης τῶν ἀρχαιοτήτων συμπιλαμενὰ στὸ πλῆθος τῶν μέτρων γιὰ τὴν προστασία καὶ τὴν προφύλαξιν τῶν ἐπιστημονικῶν ἔργων καὶ τὴ μελέτη τους. Γι' αὐτὸ μὲ τὴν ἀργένωση ἑτησίων διαλέξεων ἐπιθυμῶμεν γνωστὰ ὀνόματα τῆς Ἀρχαιολογίας νὰ παρουσιάσουν δημοσίως τὰ πορίσματα τῶν ἔργων τους καὶ τίς ἀπόψεις τους γιὰ τὰ μνημεῖα τῆς Θεσσαλονίκης, τῆς Μακεδονίας καὶ τῆς Βορείου Ἑλλάδος γενικότερα, συμβάλλοντας στὴν ἔγκληρ καὶ ἐπεύθενη ἐνημέρωση τοῦ ἐπιστημονικοῦ καὶ πλατύτερου κοινοῦ. Ἐπιπλέον μὲ τὴ δημοσίευση τῶν διαλέξεων αὐτῶν ἡ Ἐφορεία κασιθίθει γιὰ περαιτέρω συζήτηση νέων ἀρχαιολογικῶν προβληματισμῶν καὶ γνώμης, ἐνῷτι ἀντιθέτως μεταξὺ τῶν, ποὺ προοδεύουν τὸν ἐπιστημονικὸν διάλογον καὶ προάγουν τὴν ἔρευνα καὶ τὴν ιστορικὴ γνώση.

Ἡ πρώτη ἑτήσια διάλεξη, τὸ κείμενό τῆς ὁποίας ἐπιχειρηματικῶς δημοσιεύεται σήμερον, δόθηκε στὶς 11 Ἰανουαρίου 1999 ἀπὸ τὸν κ. Srđoban Ćurčić, καθηγητὴ τοῦ πανεπιστημίου Princeton University, μὲ θέμα "Some observations and questions regarding Early Christian architecture in Thessaloniki".

Χ. ΜΠΑΚΙΡΤΣΙΔΗΣ
Ἐφορὸς Ἀρχαιοτήτων

No other city of the Early Christian world - Rome, Constantinople, and Ravenna included - can match Thessaloniki in terms of the chronological spread and the extent of preservation of its major monuments.¹ The Rotunda, the Acheiropoietos, the Hagia Sophia, and even Hagios Demetrios, notwithstanding its extensive rebuilding following the Great Fire of 1917, are monuments in a class of their own. Nowhere have such representative works of architecture, such ensembles of sculptural decoration and such resplendent mosaics survived to a comparable extent.² The city of Thessaloniki truly holds pride of place among the cities of the world of Late Antiquity. Yet, paradoxically, there seems to be no other place where the historical information about the principal Early Christian buildings is more obscure. Of the four monuments I have alluded to, not a single one is securely dated, while the many subsequent building phases in each of these buildings present researchers with additional dilemmas. To the list of the main monuments we may add two lesser, partially preserved ones - the churches of Hagios Menas and Hosios David, as well as several important excavated churches - all veiled in similar shrouds of mystery. Dating of some of these monuments, presents major problems and accounts, in my opinion, for the disproportionately small amount of attention given to the city of Thessaloniki and its monuments in the general histories of late antique and Early Christian art. Variations of opinion in the proposed dating of monuments are at times staggering - the case of the conversion of the Rotunda into a Christian church being a particularly drastic example. The proposed dates in its case range from as early as the end of the fourth to as late as the middle of the sixth century, putting its architecture, and especially its mosaic decoration, into a questionable category that many would rather avoid than get embroiled in a major debate.³ Yet, the mosaics of the Rotunda are at the very apex of the late antique artistic achievement, as is now becoming even more apparent following their extensive conservation and cleaning by the Ephoreia of Byzantine Antiquities of

¹ This paper is based on the lecture delivered on January 11, 1999 in Thessaloniki. The present text represents a substantial revision of the text presented in the lecture. I should also like to express my thanks to Charalambos Bakirtzis, Peter Brown, Glen Bowersock, Euthermi Marki, Aristotle Mentzos, Kaliopi Theochanidou, with whom I discussed various aspects of this article in greater depth. While I have benefited from their advice and knowledge, the interpretations expressed here are my own and may in certain instances be at variance with their valued opinions.

² Notwithstanding several monographic studies, and many discussions in general works, J.-M. Spieser, *Thessalonique et ses monuments du IV^e au VI^e siècle. Contribution à l'étude d'une ville paléochrétienne* (Paris, 1984), remains the only study in which the monuments of the period in question are dealt with integrally.

³ Although the late fourth-century date for the mosaics was already proposed by C. Diehl, M. Le Tourneau and H. Saladin, *Les monuments chrétiens de Salonique* (Paris, 1918), its main proponent has been E. Torp. His article "Quelques remarques sur les mosaïques de l'église Saint-Georges à Thessalonique," *Actes du IX^e Congrès International des Etudes Byzantines*, I (Thessaloniki, 1953), pp. 489-98, was but the first of his several studies placing the mosaics into the context of the so-called "Theodosian renaissance". The sixth-century date for the mosaics has lately been embraced by Spieser (as in f.n. 1), pp. 132-64, who provides a convenient survey of earlier bibliography on the subject (pp. 127-32).

Thessaloniki. This major opus of Early Christian mosaic art must find its firm place in scholarship and in general books on Early Christian art. This, of course, is but one on the long list of desiderata of this type related to the Early Christian monuments of Thessaloniki.

My introductory comments pertaining to the Rotunda - also known by its modern name as the Church of St. George - outline the larger context of this key monument of late antique architecture and art. The Rotunda will be the focus of this study, though many of my observations will also introduce related problems in other Early Christian buildings of Thessaloniki (Figs. 1 and 2). The Rotunda, the largest preserved Roman domed building after the Pantheon in Rome, is one of the very few comparable late antique buildings in the Balkans to have survived essentially in continuous use since their construction.⁴ This in itself may not be worthy of more than a passing notice. Because of its longevity, however, the building has undergone many transformations that are of exceptional importance for the understanding of the general development of architecture in Thessaloniki.

Since the isolated and failed attempt by Koethe to assign the building of the Rotunda to Theodosius I, scholars have generally subscribed to the notion that it was Emperor Galerius who ordered its construction, as part of a large complex of the imperial palace in the southeastern part of Thessaloniki.⁵ Beyond this, there are very few aspects of the Rotunda, about which a consensus of scholarly opinion may be said to exist. To begin with, its original function, or intended function, completely eludes us. Two very different possibilities have been proposed. The first suggests that the Rotunda was intended to be a pagan temple dedicated to Kybeiroi or to Zeus, while the other proposes that it was planned to be the mausoleum of Galerius.

Because of the recent discovery of the imperial cremation sites and mausolea at Romuliana, present-day Gamzigrad, in eastern Serbia, the 'temple hypothesis' has come to life again at the expense of the previously more popular 'mausoleum hypothesis', championed by Hébrard, Dyggve and others.⁶ Despite its current popularity, it should be stated emphatically that the possibility of the Rotunda having been conceived as a temple is very remote. With the singular exception of the Pantheon in Rome no other Roman temple comparable, either in general

⁴ The other two are: another rotunda, curiously also dedicated to St. George, in Sofia, Bulgaria, and the Mausoleum of Emperor Diocletian, now the Cathedral of Split, Croatia. For the history and architecture of the former see A. Kirin, "The Rotunda of St. George and Late Antique Serdica: From Imperial Palace to Episcopal Complex," Ph.D. Diss., Princeton University (2000); for the latter see J.J. Wilkes, *Diocletian's Palace, Split* (Sheffield, 1986), pp. 40-45.

⁵ H. Koethe, "Das Konstantin Mausoleum und verwandte Denkmäler", *Jahrbuch des Deutschen archäologischen Instituts* 48 (1933), 185-203. Among the more recent studies concerning Galerius' palace complex, and the Rotunda see esp. A. Mentzos, "Το ναϊσκόριο και η Ροτόνδα της Θεσσαλονίκης. Νέες προτάσεις για την ιστορία του συγκροτήματος", *Βυζαντινά* 18 (1995-6), 339-64.

⁶ A. Mentzos, "The Mosaic Decoration of the Thessaloniki Rotunda. Comments on the Interpretation and Dating" (an unpublished paper kindly put at my disposal by Prof. Mentzos), who argues that the discovery of Galerius' mausoleum at Gamzigrad eliminates the possibility of the Rotunda ever having been intended as Galerius' mausoleum and that, therefore, it must have been a temple. The same point of view is shared by E. Kourkoulidou-Nikolaïdou and A. Tourta, *Wandering in Byzantine Thessaloniki* (Thessaloniki, 1997), pp. 50-52. On the discoveries at Gamzigrad see D. Srećković and Č. Vasić, *Imperial Mausolea and Consecration Memorials in Felix Romuliana (Gamzigrad, East Serbia)* (Belgrade, 1994).

conception, or in details is known.⁷ The fact that Galerius was not buried in the Rotunda, but at Romuliana, however, cannot a priori be used as an argument against this emperor's possible original intentions. The complex of the imperial palace, as we know, was begun in the last decade of the third century. If the initiation of Rotunda's construction can be presumed to have taken place ca. 297-8, by the time of Galerius' death in 311 many important events had occurred that could easily have caused Galerius to change his mind about his eventual place of burial. A comparable course of events may have occurred in conjunction with Constantine the Great, who is believed to have begun the construction of his own mausoleum in Rome, but was eventually buried in the church of the Holy Apostles in his new capital Constantinople, following his death in 337.⁸ Changes of mind in such matters, in other words, were not only theoretically possible, but in fact occasionally did take place, as byproducts of various other significant changes informing the ultimate decision. While this argument can be used to suggest the possibility that the building of the Rotunda may have been initiated by Galerius, it is by no means a proof that this actually did take place. Other possibilities, at least theoretically speaking, therefore, must remain open.

In the spirit of present inquiry, the potential role of Constantine the Great in the construction of the Rotunda is well worth considering. Constantine was highly active in the Balkans in the years 318-24, preparing himself for the decisive confrontation with his last remaining adversary, Licinius.⁹ At least part of this time he spent in Thessaloniki where, in 322-3, he is known to have built a large harbor for strategic, military purposes. Recent archaeological work in the complex of the imperial palace in Thessaloniki suggest that the large Oetagon, left unfinished at the time of Galerius' death in 311, was completed in all likelihood by Constantine.¹⁰ Completion of a major component of the Imperial Palace - possibly intended as its throne room - would confirm the suspicion that Constantine may have at one point had Thessaloniki on his mind as his new capital.¹¹ If such a scheme ever existed, we may ask ourselves whether, indeed, the Rotunda may not have been built with the intention of being *his*, and not Galerius' mausoleum. This tenuous hypothesis need not be dismissed out of hand. A number of indicators, as we shall see, give credence to such a possibility. Foremost, we must take the design characteristics of

7 Circular, domed Roman temples, of course, are known, but none are of the size of the Rotunda, all feature external columnar colonnades, and none have windows in the exterior walls of their cellas. For a perusal of Roman temple architecture cf. H. Kaehler, *Der römische Tempel* (Berlin, 1970).

8 The so-called *Tor Pignatara* (Mausoleum of Helena), on the Via Labicana, just outside of Rome, is thought to have been started as Constantine's own mausoleum, but was transformed into the mausoleum of his mother, following the emperor's decision to move his capital; cf. J.B. Ward-Perkins, *Roman Imperial Architecture* (Hammondsworth, 1981), p. 430; the most recent detailed study is: J. Rasch, *Das Mausoleum der Kaiserin Helena in Rom und der Tempio della Tosse in Tivoli* (Mainz, 1998), pp. 3-50.

9 R. Macmullen, *Constantine* (New York, 1987), pp. 123-38.

10 F. Athanassiadou, K. Georgioudi, M. Miza, M. Sarantidou, M. Chatzeras, "Νέα στοιχεία για το Οκτάγωνο του Παλατιού των Σεβαστιανών", *Το αρχαιολογικό έργο στα Μουσεία του Αγίου Σπυρίδωνος* 8 (1994), pp. 176.

11 Macmullen (as in fn. 9), p. 149 states: "... Constantine, before 324, seriously thought of establishing himself at Sirmium, and then at Serdica - perhaps also at Thessalonica. Byzantium was only the last of several candidates."

the Rotunda into account. The Rotunda, belongs to a group of Late Antique domed buildings perceived as belonging, generically speaking, to the progeny of the Pantheon in Rome.¹² It differs, however, from its presumed prototype in several significant ways. Above all, its massive cylindrical outer wall is perforated with eight large windows situated above the eight deep niches on the ground level (Fig. 3). The very few surviving comparable domed rotundas are all dated after 300, and most of them - e.g. Mausoleum of Helena and the Mausoleum of Costanza, both in Rome - imply that such design characteristics may have had Christian connotations.¹³ As is the case with the two mausolea mentioned, the Rotunda also has no crypt below its main, domed space. Such crypts were common in pagan imperial mausolea (e.g. the Mausoleum of Maxentius on the via Appia, and the so-called Tor de Schiavi on the via Praenestina, both in Rome), but appear to have been deleted in the Christian design schemes. Under those circumstances, the possibility of the Rotunda having been planned as a mausoleum for Galerius becomes questionable, while the hypothesis that it may have been started by Constantine gains credence.

In addition to these architectural characteristics, the Rotunda reveals certain aspects of its urban setting that are evocative of other known Constantinian schemes. The Rotunda, though related to, never was part of the imperial palace complex to the south of it. It was axially related and physically linked to the Arch of Galerius by means of a relatively short colonnaded road, but this linking postdates the construction of the Arch, and is generally believed to have occurred under later imperial patronage.¹⁴ Situated within some sort of an open court (referred to as a 'temenos' by the proponents of the 'temple hypothesis') the Rotunda shares many characteristics with Constantine's final mausoleum in Constantinople (Fig. 4).¹⁵ According to a recent interpretation by Cyril Mango, Constantine's mausoleum followed the established imperial tradition insofar as its form was concerned; it was a circular domed building that stood within an open court.¹⁶ It departed from the same tradition insofar that it was also a church, dedicated to the Holy Apostles.¹⁷ Furthermore, it was located within the city limits, but was

12 W. MacDonald, *The Pantheon: Design, Meaning and Progeny* (Cambridge, MA, 1976), esp. ch. 5.

13 On this and related issues see M.J. Johnson, 'Late Antique Imperial Mausolea,' Ph.D. Diss. Princeton University (1986), *passim*.

14 The point is extremely important, but - in my opinion - has not been weighed properly by those who have made this observation; cf. G. Velenis, 'Nachträgliche Beobachtungen am Oberbau des Galeriusbogens in Thessaloniki,' *Archäologischer Anzeiger* (1983), 273-5, and, following him A. Mentzos (as in f.n. 5), p. 2 and f.n. 8. If, indeed, the Arch and the Rotunda were part of the same larger scheme, as Mentzos maintains, it is difficult to understand why the physical linking of the two structures should have had to wait for decades after their presumed original completion.

15 S. Curčić, 'From the Temple of the Sun to the Temple of the Lord: Monotheistic Contribution to Architectural Iconography in Late Antiquity,' *Architectural Studies in Memory of Richard Krahlheimer*, ed. by C.L. Striker (Münz, 1997), pp. 55-9, esp. pp. 55-6.

16 C. Mango, 'Constantine's Mausoleum and the Translation of Relics,' *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 83, no. 1 (1990), 51-61.

17 The well known cruciform church, according to Mango (as in f.n. 16), was built in 358-61 adjacent to the original cylindrical domed building. The original building retained the function of the imperial mausoleum, while the cruciform structure became the new church, dedicated to the Holy Apostles.

separated from the imperial palace to which it was linked by a branch of the main colonnaded road – the Mese. Though, the physical separation of the Holy Apostles from the imperial palace complex cannot be compared to the situation of the Rotunda, conceptual similarities between the two arrangements are considerable. From this we may draw an unequivocal conclusion that the scheme employed in Thessaloniki, whether planned by Galerius or, as I would argue, by Constantine, was clearly the forerunner of the final solution used in the case of the original Holy Apostles in Constantinople. Thus, it may be said that in the Rotunda we have the closest indications of what Constantine's mausoleum in Constantinople may have actually looked like.

The fate of the Rotunda in the decades following the initial stages of its construction and its eventual conversion into a church remains murky. Was the building, actually completed as initially planned, or did it remain unfinished for several decades? The question has been posed repeatedly by different scholars, but no consensus as to what actually may have happened exists. An important archaeological discovery in the Rotunda, that took place as a result of the restoration of the building following the 1978 earthquake, suggests that it was left incomplete, with a very large unintended opening in its dome.¹⁸ A new section of the building shows the level to which the construction had actually progressed at the time of its presumed disruption in 311 (Fig. 5). The changed curvature in the upper part of the dome had been observed long before, inviting various hypotheses, one of which proposed that the original building had an opaeon at the apex of the dome comparable to that of the Pantheon in Rome.¹⁹ The discovery of what was thought to be a drain, in the center of the floor directly under the dome of the Rotunda, was initially taken as the confirmation of the opaeon hypothesis. The "drain" would have served the logical function of collecting the rain water that would have come in through the opaeon.²⁰ It must be stressed from the outset that an opaeon within a building such as the Rotunda would have been a completely idiosyncratic design feature. With as many large windows as the Rotunda has, an opaeon would have been rendered superfluous both on the practical, as well as on the symbolic level. It should likewise be noted that the opaeon, as an architectural feature, does not appear in any of the surviving Late Roman domed rotundas, and that this trend parallels the regular appearance of windows within the vertical walls of these structures. Finally, the so-called "drain" may not have been a drain at all, for it had no conduits that could have taken the water away.²¹ Although, on the basis of all of this, the idea of an opaeon can be put to rest, the question how to interpret the large opening with

¹⁸ K. Theodoridou, "Η Ροτόντα της Θεσσαλονίκης. Νέα στοιχεία για την αρχιτεκτονική της", *Επιστημονική Επετηρίδα της Θεολογικής Σχολής της Θεσσαλονίκης*, 16 (1992), 57–76. ("The Rotunda at Thessaloniki. New Discoveries and Definitions after the Restoration Works").

¹⁹ The notion that an opaeon may have existed in the apex of the dome was first introduced by E. Dyggve, "La région palatiale de Thessalonique," *Acta Medievigiana Hafniae*, MDLIV (Copenhagen, 1958), pp. 353–65, whose idea did have some following; cf. G. Velenis, "Some Observations on the Original Form of the Rotunda in Thessaloniki," *Balkan Studies* 15 (1974), 298–307, esp. p. 299 and pl. 5.

²⁰ Th. Patakas, *The Rotunda of Saint George in Thessaloniki* (Thessaloniki, 1985), p. 23, where the idea of the opaeon is also entertained.

uneven edges in Rotunda's original dome must still be addressed. Does it reveal unfinished construction, or was it a result of a collapse possibly due to an earthquake?²² Though a conclusion cannot be drawn with absolute certainty, the presence of an uneven edge in the masonry of the lower part of the dome shell suggests a collapse rather than an interruption in the construction process. Construction of domes made of brick implies a discipline in the manner of laying horizontal courses, hence an uneven edge would seem inconsistent with the very nature of the construction process. An earthquake is actually known to have struck Thessaloniki in January 363.²³ The absence of a marble floor could also be related to earthquake damage, though the possibility of its never having been installed should not be dismissed either. In any case, a building of this type and significance is unimaginable without an elaborate marble floor. On the basis of comparable buildings, such as the Octagon within the imperial palace, we are in the position to visualize how such a floor may have looked. In the final analysis, the absence of a marble floor may simply indicate, as I believe, that at the time the Rotunda's construction was completed, its interior was left without decoration.

On the basis of all of the factors considered above, I am inclined to argue that the original construction of the Rotunda may have been due to Constantine I. During his stay in Thessaloniki, before his final campaign against Licinius in 324, he may have eyed Thessaloniki as potentially his new capital. Finishing the imperial palace and the building of his mausoleum, therefore, could have been among his agenda, along with the building of a new harbor in 322-3.

There is no doubt in anyone's mind that the original form of the Rotunda, was modified by the addition of an apsed bema and an ambulatory, at the time when the building was converted into a Christian church (Fig. 6). When exactly this may have occurred is still very much a subject of debate, while the difference between the extreme proposed dates is embarrassingly wide - from the late fourth to the middle of the sixth century. There are basically three main groups of proponents regarding the dating issue - those favoring the late fourth-century date, those subscribing to a mid-fifth century date (the largest group at the moment), and those inclined toward a sixth-century date. The early date, first proposed by Diehl, Le Tourneau and Saladin, has had its most ardent champion in Torp.²⁴ Proponents of a fifth-century date constitute the largest group, though their ideas about a specific date, as well as

21 I am grateful to Professor Mentzos who brought this fact to my attention.

22 The idea of a partial dome collapse on account of an earthquake was suggested by Mentzos (as in fn. 6), p. 4.

23 K. Theoharidou (sic.), *The Architecture of Hagia Sophia, Thessaloniki from its Erection up to the Turkish Conquest*, BAR International Series 399 (Oxford, 1988), p. 8, who cites the *Archive of the Department of Mechanics of Seismology*, Imperial College, London, as the source of information; see also a new edition in Greek: ed., *H ἀγιογραφία του ναού της Αγίας Σοφίας στην Θεσσαλονίκη* (Athens, 1994).

24 Ch. Diehl, M. Le Tourneau, and H. Saladin (as in fn. 2); among Torp's several studies, see "The Date of the Conversion of the Rotunda at Thessaloniki into a Church," *The Norwegian Institute at Athens: The First Five Lectures* (Athens, 1991), 13-28, with a convenient summary of his earlier publications, and of the entire dating debate.

their reasons differ somewhat.²⁵ Finally, a group of scholars promotes a sixth-century date.²⁶ In urging the settlement of this crucial issue, I would like to make some observations that, in my mind, strongly support the late fourth-century date.

First, let me turn to some practical considerations. If the Rotunda, as I have proposed, was actually completed by Constantine, it must have suffered damage in an earthquake shortly after the actual construction work was terminated - possibly in 363 - but before the marble revetment, or any other decorative features were installed. After Constantine's departure from Thessaloniki to confront Licinius, he never returned to the city again. In the aftermath of his victory, his attention and energies would be focused on the new capital city, Constantinople. Following his death, the building and development of Constantinople became the first priority of his successor, Constantius II (337-61). It was only with the rise of Theodosius I (379-95), that Thessaloniki entered the center stage of imperial attention once again - even if only briefly. Making Thessaloniki the base for his activities in the central Balkans in 380-1, Theodosius is the most likely patron for the completion of the Rotunda as a full-fledged church. If that were the case, it would leave a maximum span of time of some sixty-five years, between the presumed termination of the work begun by Constantine and the conversion of the building into a church by Theodosius. If the earthquake of 363 actually caused damage to the Rotunda, as I have suggested, the Rotunda would not have been left in ruinous state for long. The possibility of a major building left in semi-ruinous state for decades - even in the difficult times of the second half of the fourth century - seems somewhat unlikely. For the same reason, a later date for the conversion appears even less likely. The proposed conversion dates for the Rotunda - in the fifth, or even sixth century - makes it questionable that a building of such importance, in the immediate vicinity of the functioning imperial palace, could have been left unused for possibly two hundred years or more. Even more difficult would be to imagine the Rotunda left standing for decades with its dome collapsed.

Second, the magnificent mosaic program, that lies in the center of the scholarly controversy, and whose programmatic and stylistic aspects find few analogies that could be helpful in solving the dating problem, does have certain characteristics that require further serious consideration (Fig. 7). The mosaics display a number of decorative elements that are easily associated with the classical taste, but do not fit

25 Here we may cite M. Vickers, "The Date of the Mosaics of the Rotunda at Thessaloniki," *Papers of the British School at Rome* 38 (1970), 183-7 (ca. 450, or slightly later, on the basis of brick stamps on bricks in the uppermost portion of the dome that match those used in the fifth-century city walls); E. Kleinbauer, "The Iconography and the Date of the Mosaics of the Rotunda of Hagios Georgios, Thessaloniki," *Viator* 3 (1972), 27-107 (450-80), on the basis of the style of the mosaics and the brick stamps; most recently A. Mentzos (as in fn. 5) (ca. 437; on historical grounds).

26 In addition to the initial advocate of this dating, E. Weigand, "Der Kalenderfries von Hagios Georgios in Thessalonike. Datierung, Meilen- und Kunstgeschichtliche Stellung," *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 39 (1939), 116-43 (first half of the 6th c.), see also Spieser (as in fn. 1), ch. 4, esp. p. 164 (early 6th c.).

comfortably within the framework of later fifth or sixth-century art. These include a 'pseudo-cornice', separating the lowest zone from the now mostly lost intermediate zone of mosaics, and the floral 'candelabra' that separate the eight principal pictorial panels in the lowest zone from each other (Figs. 8 and 9). The use of the astragal, egg and dart, dentils, and bead-and-reel motifs in this 'pseudo-cornice' are part of the standard vocabulary of cornice designs in classical architecture, still commonly employed in late antique buildings (Fig. 10).²⁷ The same may be said of the 'candelabra' whose role in the decoration of late antique domes is well attested.²⁸ In addition, the conspicuous absence of halos in association with martyr saints and the extremely sparse use of crosses, would all seem to support an early date. Ultimately, the unconventional depiction of Theophany in the dome of the Rotunda would seem to have been consistent with the 'experimental spirit' of earlier monumental Christian art, in contrast to the 'codified' character of Ascension scenes in the art of the fifth and sixth centuries. Though no monumental examples of the latter scene are actually preserved, the evidence provided by the Monza and Bobbio ampullae, and manuscript illuminations such as that in the Rabula Gospels testify as to their probable existence.²⁹

Last but not least, the historical context seems to lend major support to the late-fourth century dating. The choice of Thessaloniki by emperor Theodosius I as a temporary base for his activities in the central Balkans was not a fortuitous act. Thessaloniki, along with its Balkan hinterlands, was an area where Christianity had made relatively slow progress even seven decades after it was declared the official religion of the Roman Empire. Theodosius' aggressive policies in this context were apparently aimed at altering the situation and establishing Christianity, once and for all, as the preeminent religion in this region. His activities in Stobi, for example, are associated with the destruction of the local synagogue, the issuing of an imperial edict banning the use of the city's theater, and with a considerable increase in the volume of construction. This involved the building of several luxurious residences and a number of new churches, despite the fact that the city as a whole was in the midst of a general population decline.³⁰

Memories of Theodosius' stay in Thessaloniki are associated with a particularly dark moment in the city's history - the infamous massacre in 390 of 7000 of its citizens in the Hippodrome, where they had been lured under false pretexts.³¹ While the direct reasons for the massacre are said to have been acts of mass disobedience toward the emperor-appointed Gothic troops, the draconian measure may just as

27 J.-P. Adam, *Roman Building. Materials and Techniques* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1994), p. 330 ff. a Corinthian frieze from the Arch of Constantine in Rome.

28 We may refer to the domes of Santa Costanza in Rome, and the Baptistery of the Orthodox in Ravenna, as the best known examples; cf. R. Michel, *Die Mosaiken von S. Costanza in Rom* (Leipzig, 1912), pl. 2 and S. Kostel, *The Orthodox Baptistery in Ravenna* (New Haven and London, 1965), p. 77, and figs. 40, 42.

29 K. Weitzmann, ed., *Age of Spirituality. Late Antique and Early Christian Art, Third to Seventh Century* (New York, 1979), p. 566, Fig. 79 (Monza ampulla), p. 455, Fig. 68 (Rabula Gospels).

30 J.R. Wiseman, 'The City in Macedonia Secunda,' *Ville et peuplement dans l'Illlyricum protobyzantin* (Rome, 1984), pp. 288-314, provides a succinct summary of the history and archaeology of late antique Stobi.

31 S. Williams and G. Frick, *Theodosius. The Empire at Bay* (New Haven and London, 1994), pp. 67ff.

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well have served other purposes. Whatever the actual causes may have been, a city gravely wounded by its own ruler may have become an 'ideal recipient' of imperial largesse. Completion of the Rotunda and its conversion into a church may have been perceived as an apt way of expressing imperial penitence following the bloodbath in the Hippodrome. The construction of the second Hagia Sophia in Constantinople in 527, it will be recalled, followed a similar bloodbath carried out under the orders of Justinian I in the nearby Hippodrome in the aftermath of the so-called "Nika" riot.

Returning to the architecture of the converted Rotunda, we must consider its place and its relationship to other contemporary buildings. As an enormous domed building with a magnificent mosaic program adorning its dome, this would have been a rare, though not a unique creation at the time. A comparison with the large tetraconch church of S. Lorenzo in Milan (Fig. 11), built during the last quarter of the fourth century has been made, pointing to various similarities between the two buildings, particularly to the presence of an ambulatory enveloping the central domed space.³² It should be noted here that possibly at the same time, or shortly thereafter, Thessaloniki may have acquired another enormous domed building with a comparable ambulatory.³³ While its identification as a 'martyrion' must remain in doubt, it was certainly a church whose dimensions and stylistic characteristics are very clear.

Finished, and adapted as a church, the Rotunda appears to have also had a funerary function, as may be gleaned from the presence of well built tombs within the adjacent hexagonal chapel (Fig. 12). What the precise intentions of Theodosius I with the conversion of the Rotunda may have been may never be fully known, but related questions must continue being asked, and answers - even if only partial - must be sought.

The introduction of an open portico on the south side of the Rotunda, was clearly an integral part of the creation of a spacious ambulatory that must have superseded the original entrance portico. This portico, in addition to providing a new entrance into the church, obviously respected the original axis that linked the Rotunda to the Arch of Galerius and the imperial palace beyond. Furthermore, a small hexagonal building at its east end, comparable to the 'satellite' polygonal chapels accompanying the church of S. Lorenzo in Milan, suggests that burials for individuals of some distinction were part of the total scheme. Whether these burials were to be those of high-level ecclesiastical figures, or high-ranking secular individuals is not known, but the funerary function of this constellation is beyond any doubt. Presence of such domed burial chapels attached to major churches was

32 S. Lewis, "San Lorenzo Revisited: A Theodosian Palace Church at Milan," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 32, no. 3 (Oct. 1973), pp. 197-222, esp. pp. 208-10.

33 E. Marki, "Ένας ἀρχαῖος, ἀντιστοιχιστὸς ναὸς στὴ Θεσσαλονίκη," *Μνημειολόγος* 13 (1983), 117-33. The building, undoubtedly a church, situated near the original Golden Gate, on the west side, must have been conceived as a pendant to the Rotunda in a similar situation on the east side of Thessaloniki. The church was of nearly identical dimensions as the Rotunda (its dome measuring c. 22m in diameter). Marki dates the church to the end of the fifth century, but on the basis of its architectural characteristics and the style of its architectural sculpture, a date closer to 400 is more likely.

a common practice from Constantinian times on, witness the examples of Old St. Peter's and Sta. Agnese with Sta. Costanza in Rome.

Further important changes in the Rotunda may have occurred in the sixth century. Though no documentation exists, it has been suggested, and is generally accepted, that the building received its monumental ambo at this time.³⁴ The remains of this ambo were taken to Istanbul around the turn of the century, where they may be seen in the Archaeological Museum. Its marble base is preserved within the space of the Rotunda's erstwhile south portico, where it was moved at an unknown time. What may have prompted the addition of this ambo - one of the finest examples known - to the Rotunda at a date more than a century after its original conversion? Would this not have marked an important functional change in the life of the Rotunda and, if so, what type of a change would this have been? What other developments may have been occurring in Thessaloniki at the time that could have induced such a functional change in the Rotunda?

To begin answering these questions we must turn to the indirect evidence in the Hagia Sophia. The re-used fifth and sixth-century capitals in the present church of Hagia Sophia have been interpreted as indicating that its predecessor - from where the spoils are believed to have been taken - may have undergone repairs at some point before its final destruction around 620 (Figs. 13 and 14). The giant basilica was built in the fifth century, and may have been damaged in some unrecorded earthquake in the sixth century. The fifth-century basilica of Hagios Demetrios is known to have been substantially repaired following an earthquake and fire in the seventh century. However, its ensemble of column capitals, some clearly in secondary use, includes several that are demonstrably of sixth-century date. Their presence in the context of the present building suggests that another, less extensive reconstruction may have occurred also in the sixth century. Because sixth-century capitals, in contrast to the fifth-century types, are very rare in Thessaloniki, one is inclined to think that they were produced in an ad-hoc manner in conjunction with specific limited interventions on damaged older buildings. Our hypothetical suggestion that the predecessor of Hagia Sophia may have been undergoing just such limited repairs in the course of the sixth century leads us to the question whether this may not have been the time when the Rotunda could have been chosen as the temporary cathedral of Thessaloniki.³⁵ The addition of a monumental ambo to the Rotunda may be viewed as important indicator of just such a functional change. An octagonal structure at the southwest point of the circular ambulatory - possibly a baptistery - may also have been added at this time (Figs. 15 and 16).³⁶ In this

³⁴ On the ambo see J.-P. Sodini "L'ambon de la rotonde Saint-Georges: Remarques sur la typologie et décor," *Bulletin de Correspondance Hellénique* 100 (1976), 493-510, who dates it to the mid-sixth century, also E. Kourkoulidou-Nikolaïdou, "Les ambons paléochrétiens à Thessalonique et à Philippi," *Corsi di cultura sull'arte ravennate e bizantina* 31 (1984), 255-75.

³⁵ This idea was first proposed by Thorp (as in *n. 24*), pp. 20-21, but it has been ignored in subsequent scholarship. The left (i.e. western) hexagonal tower flanking the southern vestibule. No remains of such a structure have been found, however.

context, I would like to suggest that the Ottoman octagonal oblations font in the courtyard in front of the Rotunda is actually the re-used baptismal font from the sixth-century phase in the life of the Rotunda (Figs. 17 and 18). Use of monolithic marble fonts in the later fifth and early sixth centuries appears to have replaced the earlier custom of constructed floor fonts, typical of the later fourth and early fifth centuries. This occurred before the entire custom of adult baptism in monumental fonts was completely superseded by baptism of infants in small-scale fonts of a very different type. In that sense, the baptistery of the Rotunda could be viewed as a transitional stage in this evolutionary process, having superseded the large, built floor font of Hagios Ioannis, the baptistery of the fifth-century cathedral of Thessaloniki.³⁷

The hypothetical 'upgrading' of the Rotunda into the cathedral of Thessaloniki, as I have proposed it, would have occurred sometime in the sixth century. This may have followed the rebuilding of the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople in 527-32, as a huge domed building, of a totally different character than its own basilican predecessor. It should be noted that among the hallmarks of the new cathedral in the Byzantine capital were a large ambo, prominently situated below its magnificent dome, and a large octagonal baptistery with a marble font in its centre.³⁸ The adaptation of the Rotunda, then, would have given Thessaloniki, its own 'new' large domed cathedral, outfitted with a monumental ambo and accompanied by an octagonal baptistery, in keeping with the Constantinopolitan model.

The final destruction of the original cathedral of Thessaloniki, apparently the result of earthquakes ca. 620, may have prolonged the role of the Rotunda as the city's cathedral by several more decades, while the construction of the new church of Hagia Sophia must have gotten under way.³⁹ The new church differed substantially from its predecessor, reflecting important general changes that had occurred in Byzantine architecture in the course of the sixth century. Several times smaller in floor area than its giant predecessor, the new church was intended to be vaulted and to have a dome (Fig. 19). The transformations described followed a similar pattern of change that took place in the famous church of the Theotokos at Ephesos, where a large three-aisled basilica was superseded by a smaller domed building during the early sixth century (Fig. 20).⁴⁰ The initial phase of the new Hagia Sophia, was marked by the importation of building forms and building techniques from Constantinople, now still visible in its east facade (Fig. 21).⁴¹ A three-sided apse type with a large window opening in each of its faces, replaced the

37 For Hag. Ioannis, cf. E. Marki, "H 'Ayia Sophia kai to neoplatoniko to to pto dno to dionotio doxoume," *Byzantioslavica et alia* (1997), pp. 54-61; also P. Asimakopoulou-Atraka, "Notios tis 'Ayias Sophias: To neoplatoniko to pto dno," *ibid.*, pp. 62-71. For the physical relationship of H. Ioannis and the original cathedral of Hagia Sophia, see E. Hadjityrphos, "H eklogi, to neoplatoniko to dionotio to pto dno tis 'Ayias Sophias," *ibid.*, pp. 97-128, esp. pp. 97-100.

38 S. Boyce, "Le baptistère de Sainte Sophie d'Istanbul," *Ann. del IX Congresso internazionale di archeologia cristiana* (Vatican City, 1978), v. 2, pp. 257-73.

39 K. Theodoridou (sic.), (as in fn. 23), pp. 155-57.

40 R. Krauthammer, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture* (Harmondsworth, 1986), p. 107, fig. 59, with the older literature on the subject.

41 Theodoridou, (as in fn. 23), pp. 24-29, on the sixth-century Constantinopolitan aspects of the church design.

fifth-century characteristically Thessalonikan round apse type featuring a series of arched windows supported on monolithic marble mullions. The apses of Hagios Demetrios (Fig. 23) and Hosios David are the only ones that have preserved this arrangement in its original form.⁴² The apse of the new Hagia Sophia, by contrast, is related to the sixth-century churches in Constantinople, such as Hagia Eirine (Fig. 22) and H. Sergios and Bakkos. The building technique, visible on the exterior of the three apses, involves alternating bands of several brick courses with larger bands made of stone blocks (Fig. 21). This technique was at home in Constantinople, but is practically unknown in this form in Thessaloniki. The construction of the new church, initiated possibly under imperial auspices by some unknown Constantinopolitan masters, was interrupted - presumably by another earthquake - only to be continued with modifications of the original design during the second half of the seventh century. It was in that context, that the church may have been finally completed and inaugurated by Justinian II during the celebration of triumph in Thessaloniki after his victory over the Slavs in 688.⁴³

Notwithstanding many subsequent modifications and additions, it is the late seventh-century appearance of the building that is substantially preserved in the present form of the church. Especially significant here is the interpretation regarding the appearance of the dome of the church which, according to the results of Dr. Kaliopi Theodoridou's detailed study, is entirely of one built, belonging to the seventh-century phase of construction, completed by c. 690 (Fig. 24).⁴⁴ Without presuming the possibility of challenging the results of an extensive archaeological and architectural investigation of the building, I will venture a few observations and will raise some questions that do not find clear answers in the published work. My discussion must begin with a basic observation that square drums with such an arrangement of windows are unknown in Byzantine architecture. The very design idea, if it can be described as such, suggests a modification of the original intentions. A glance at the dome of Hagia Eirine in Constantinople, probably rebuilt after the earthquake of 740, illustrates a dome type with a drum perforated with windows that became standard following its introduction in the sixth century (Fig. 25).⁴⁵ Notable is its essentially cylindrical form, the relatively large size of the windows (subsequently blocked up) and the manner of buttressing each individual pier between the windows. These hallmarks in the design of domes could, and did, vary in details, but they seldom varied in general principles. From that point of view, the dome of Hagia Sophia would have been an unicum. That, of itself, of

42 The apse of Acheiropoietos basilica, by contrast, was remodeled at a later time (see discussion below).

43 Theodoridou (as in f.n. 23), pp. 148-55, esp. 153-5. Also: Ch. Bakirtzis, "Νεότερες ανακατασκευές στην κτιριοποιία του τοπικού της Αγίας Σοφίας Θεσσαλονίκης," *Βυζαντινιστ* 11 (1982), 167-80, who proposes that the church was built by Justinian II in 688-90 (p. 178). This hypothesis is linked to the Patriarch Paul (688-694), identified with an Archbishop Paul whose name appears in an older inscription partially preserved in the dome of the church (p. 177).

44 Theodoridou (as in f.n. 23), pp. 41-45, who gives a detailed analysis of the dome drum construction, and rejects the possibility of a later intervention.

45 U. Peschlow, *Die Irenenkirche in Istanbul. Untersuchungen zur Architektur*, Istanbul Mitteilungen. Beiheft 18, pp. 80-81 ("Die Kuppel").

course, would not give us an a-priori license to doubt it as a possible historical fact. There are additional aspects, however, that present us with lingering concerns that need to be stated, because their implications could effect our understanding of far more than the dome form of Hagia Sophia alone.

A careful examination of the cubical drum of the dome of Hagia Sophia under favorable light conditions reveals a band of brick courses whose outer faces are not smooth, apparently the result of having been deliberately broken off (Fig. 26). This band of several regularly laid and subsequently broken-off brick courses, directly below the drum windows, suggests that a projecting cornice consisting of a double tier of dog-tooth friezes may have once existed in this location. Similar cornices appear elsewhere on the building. Such dog-tooth friezes, in fact, normally functioned as cornices outlining roof eaves, and were never used as a means of articulating a flat plane of a rising wall, an aesthetic role that they only eventually acquired in Middle Byzantine architecture. Their removal, in this case, suggests two things in reverse order. First, their physical obliteration was mandated by an aesthetic lack of need for a horizontal band at the mid-point of the cubical dome drum. Second, as initially built, they must have been intended as a crowning features of a much lower, blind cubical base, supporting a conventional dome drum. This, of course, must be coordinated with Dr. Theodoridou's proposed dating sequence. The dog-tooth friezes could be said to belong to the early seventh-century phase, and that they may have been eliminated at the time of the construction of the new seventh-century cubical drum.

Because the interior of the dome itself contains the famous ninth-century Ascension mosaic with two fragments of an older inscription incorporated into a decorative band at its base, it is clear that some violent damage must have occurred that would have caused such an intervention. On this point, I am inclined to accept the suggestion made by Professor Georgios Velenis, who has proposed that the dome may have suffered severe damage as a result of earthquakes recorded between 813-820.⁴⁶ Likewise, if a dome drum, with much thinner piers would have been preserved, could we not think of them as having been reinforced by being completely encased into the massive cubical base that we see today? Dr. Theodoridou, who has rejected the possibility of a later intervention in the area of the dome drum, as far as can be gleaned from her text, did not consider this possibility.⁴⁷ An intervention, such as the one I am proposing - as a remedial solution, aimed at consolidating a structurally damaged building - would seem entirely in keeping with similar anti-earthquake measures adopted elsewhere in the Byzantine world.⁴⁸ Comparable interventions, after all, are known even among

46 G. Velenis, "Η ἀποκατάσταση του χώρου της Αγίας Σοφίας Θεσσαλονίκης μετά από τὸ ἐπιχρηστικό διάβημα," *Θεσσαλονικιαὶ ἀνάκτορα* 3 (1997), pp. 70-77, esp. p. 72.

47 Theodoridou (as in En. 23), p. 45.

48 S. Curci, "Byzantine Architecture on Cyprus: An Introduction to the Problem of the Genesis of a Regional Style," *Medieval Cyprus. Studies in Art, Architecture and History in Memory of Doula Mouriki* (Princeton, 1999), pp. 71-80, where such interventions as anti-earthquake remedies were so common that they may have played a major role in shaping the style of later architecture on the island.

Thessalonikan monuments, as the apses of the Acheiropoietos basilica (Fig. 27), and the Rotunda (Fig. 29) demonstrate. Their original design involved large arched windows supported on relatively slender marble mullions, comparable to those that have survived in the church of Hagios Demetrios (Fig. 23). At both, the Acheiropoietos and the Rotunda, the size of the windows was made smaller, owing to the substitution of marble mullions by massive brick piers, while at the Acheiropoietos, the number of windows was also reduced from the original five to three. Dr. Theodoridou has duly noted these changes and has co-related them with the construction of the dome of Hagia Sophia, associating all of them with earthquake activities ca. 620 recorded in the Miracles of H. Demetrios.⁴⁹

At this point it is important to return to the Rotunda, and to examine the extent and the nature of changes on it. The apse of the Rotunda appears to have undergone two distinctive rebuilding enterprises, the second one of which was far more serious and included not only the bema vaulting, but also a substantial section of the main dome brought down by the collapse of the main bema arch (Fig. 28).⁵⁰ This reconstruction involved also the replacement of the marble window mullions in the main apse with massive brick piers, and the construction of two flying buttresses at the northeastern and southeastern points of the bema (Figs. 30 and 31).⁵¹ Moreover, it was at this time, judging by the available evidence, that the presumably damaged outer ambulatory was dismantled. This can be clearly documented in the area of the bema, but whether the entire ambulatory was actually eliminated at the same time, cannot be determined with certainty. The masonry of the two flying buttresses reveals many marble architectural fragments, including several large window mullions which, in all likelihood, were pilfered from the debris of the fallen parts of the Rotunda (Figs. 32 and 34). Further careful examinations of the building will be necessary to determine precisely where these pieces may have actually come from.

For now, the more important question is that of the actual date when all of this may have taken place. General consensus is that the interventions in question were all the result of earthquakes presumed to have taken place ca. 620. Because neither the earthquakes, nor the actual individual acts of reconstruction are documented precisely, the proposed dating can be brought to question. Consequently, we are left - it would seem - with a very large "gray area" of speculative dating that effects our thinking not only about one, but about most of the important monuments of Thessaloniki. The first question that comes to mind, is whether such an extensive rebuilding program could have occurred at the time when Thessaloniki was under continuous external threat by the Slavs. Could these repairs not have taken place at a later, more auspicious period of time, instead? Indeed, could not the entire process

⁴⁹ Theodoridou, *as in* fn. 23, p. 81. The date "in the 630s" has generally been superseded in scholarship with a new dating, ca. 620, following the interpretation of the relevant section in the Miracles of H. Demetrios by Ch. Bakirtzis, "Η έκδοσις του ποταμού της Θεσσαλονίκης," *Βυζαντινὰ* 7 (1975), esp. pp. 327-33, and subsequently in *Slaves dans les Balkans II* (Paris, 1981), pp. 105.

⁵⁰ Theodoridou (*as in* fn. 18), p. 68-71.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 71-2.

the initial earthquake damage and the related reconstruction have occurred during the ninth century, the result of the earthquakes actually recorded in 813-20, for example?

To support this line of thinking, allow me to present some observations in reverse order relative to their importance. To begin with, we know that the rebuilt apse vault of the Rotunda was decorated toward the end of the ninth century with a fresco composition depicting the Ascension (Fig. 33).⁵² Iconographically, and stylistically, this composition is closely related to that executed in mosaic in the dome of the Hagia Sophia.⁵³ In the case of the Hagia Sophia mosaic, we know that it was preceded by an older one, of which only two fragmentary inscriptions survive incorporated into the present mosaic. What, if anything would have been depicted in the apse of the Rotunda, if it had been rebuilt already in the seventh century? Of course, it could be argued that because of the period of Iconoclasm, the semi-dome of the apse may have been decorated by an un-iconic representation. Had that been the case, would such a representation have been completely removed with all the traces of its mortar before the setting of the new fresco depicting the Ascension? A cautious answer to that question would have to be - probably not. Had there been a fresco in that position, it is far more likely that it would have been covered up by a new composition, and that its traces, therefore, ought to still be visible below the new composition, and that is not the case. The alternative explanation would be that the apse vault would have been without any images for hundred-fifty years or more, before the present Ascension scene was painted, but that also seems rather unlikely. Ultimately, a conclusion that seems most plausible is that the rebuilding of the bema and the decoration of the apse vault may have been chronologically related. To put it differently, the partial rebuilding of the Rotunda's main dome, the bema vaulting, the apse windows, and the construction of the two buttresses, all may have occurred at the same general time as the painting of the Ascension, sometime in the course of the ninth century. Such a proposal could well have been related to what happened at the Hagia Sophia itself where, as has been suggested, the setting of the mosaic may have been linked to the partial rebuilding of the dome, also in the course of the ninth century.

If we may be permitted the luxury of the proposed assumption, one would need to re-examine the general relationship of the Rotunda and the Hagia Sophia once more. According to an earlier observation expressed in this paper, the Rotunda may have taken over the role of the city cathedral sometime in the sixth-century, during the repairs carried out on the giant basilica that stood on the site of the present church of Hagia Sophia. Before the cathedral function could return to its original locus, the basilica undergoing repairs was completely destroyed, requiring a complete rebuilding. Thus, according to my suggestion, the cathedral function would have remained at the Rotunda through the eighth century, or at least until the

52. A. Kyrgopoulos, "Η ανακατασκευή της Αναστάσεως εν τη ἀψίδι του Αγίου Σπυρίδωνος εν Θεσσαλονίκῃ," *Archaeologia Thessalonica* (1938), pp. 32-53.

53. R. Cormack, "Ninth-Century Monumental Painting and Mosaic in Thessalonike," Ph.D. Diss. University of London (1968), ch. 4 (pp. 116-83), though unpublished is the most thorough discussion of this important mosaic.

final completion of the present Hagia Sophia, around 690. If we are to assume, that the ambulatory and the bema of the Rotunda remained standing beyond the 620s, as I have suggested, The Rotunda, with its floor area of ca 2400m² would have had a floor area *nearly twice as large* as the newly finished Hagia Sophia, *including its gallery space*. It is noteworthy that without the ambulatory the floor area of the Rotunda was reduced to less than half of its former size (to only c. 1000 m²), and that would have made it smaller than the Hagia Sophia.⁵⁴ Whether such a consideration would have mattered in the years around 690, or around 890 is difficult to say. We do know that the size of new church buildings was generally diminishing after the end of the sixth century. Therefore, one need not expect that the size would have been a crucial issue in determining whether a church was fit to be a cathedral or not. Yet, the issue cannot be dismissed as being entirely irrelevant either. It is important to recall that the second oldest historical reference to the Hagia Sophia - dated 904 - mentions three major churches in the city: the Hagia Sophia, the church of the Theotokos (Acheiropoietos) and Hagios Demetrios - but not the Rotunda.⁵⁵ Clearly, by 904, having been badly damaged, and dramatically shrunken in size by the elimination of its spacious ambulatory, the Rotunda was no longer considered one of the main churches of Thessaloniki.

My ruminations about the historical importance of the Rotunda and its possible role as the city's cathedral will consider yet another aspect of its poorly known late antique phase. The published plan of the excavations of the Rotunda, carried out under the direction of Ernest Hébrard, include a structure labeled simply as the "Salle Abside" (Fig. 16).⁵⁶ Located to the west of the Early Christian ambulatory, this apsed hall is recorded as having communicated with the ambulatory, as well as with a space of unknown function - in all likelihood some sort of an atrium - axially fronting the Rotunda to its west. The apse was situated on the north side of the hall, so that its main door would have faced to the south, communicating with the open space of the presumed atrium. Seen in relationship to the Rotunda, this apsed hall appears to have been a relatively modest structure. The impression is deceiving, however, for its interior usable space would have measured ca. 7.5 x 13m. Both in size and in physical orientation it is comparable to a group of such apsed spaces, published recently by Narkissos Karydas, and identified by him as triclinia of the city residences of the wealthy, mostly datable to the late fourth or fifth centuries.⁵⁷ The triclinium of a residence excavated on Olympiados Street, for example, has comparable dimensions - ca. 8 x 14m, while the better known examples - at

54. Without the ambulatory, the usable floor area of the Rotunda would have been ca. 1000m²; as such it would have been smaller than the usable space in Hagia Sophia (ca. 1350m²).

55. Theoharidou (as in fn. 23), based on Θεόδωρος Στουδίτης, *Επιστολὰι*, *Patrologia Graeca*, 99, epist. I, line 917.

56. E. Hébrard, "Les Travaux du Service Archéologique de l'Armée d'Orient à l'Arc de Triomphe de Galère et à l'église Saint-Georges de Salonique," *Bulletin de Correspondance Hellénique* 44 (1920), 5-40, pls. III-IV.

57. N. Karydas, "Προκατασκευαστικές οδοί με τρικλίνα στη Θεσσαλονίκη," *Τὸ ἀρχαιολογικὸν ἔργο τῆς ἀποστολῆς* 10-B (1996), pp. 571-84.

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Ioulianou Street 18 (also known as 'Laodigitria'), and the reconstructed room in the Museum of Byzantine Culture, illustrate the type with greater clarity (Figs. 35 and 36).⁵⁸

As for the reasons for the appearance of a residential complex adjacent to a church, one only need evoke a number of instances that illustrate the precise planning formula used in conjunction with contemporary episcopal church complexes.⁵⁹ These include the sixth-century cathedral complex at Parentium, modern Poreč in Croatia (Fig. 37), and a late fifth-century complex, recently excavated at Louloudies by the Ephoreia for Byzantine Antiquities of Thessaloniki, under the direction of Dr. Eutherpi Marki (Fig. 38).⁶⁰ Could the "Salle Abside" adjacent to the ambulatory of the Rotunda be a further indication that the complex may have been intended as an episcopal center? To be able to make such claims, we would need a clearer archaeological proof of the many related issues. At the present, this must be left merely as an attractive possibility. While my suggestion that the Rotunda may have served as the city's cathedral between the sixth and eighth centuries hinges entirely on circumstantial evidence, the first dated historical reference to Hagia Sophia, referring to its function as possibly being the city's cathedral in 795, is of little help in resolving the issue at hand.⁶¹ The only historically secure evidence of the Rotunda ever having been the cathedral of Thessaloniki comes from a much later period. Following the conversion of the church of Hagia Sophia into a mosque in 1524, the Rotunda took over the role of the cathedral, and retained that function for the next seven decades, until it too, became a mosque in 1590-91.⁶²

My focus on the Rotunda and the related Early Christian monuments of Thessaloniki has given me an opportunity to present some of my observations and to raise some questions. My conclusions, outlined strictly as working hypotheses, may be summarized in the following manner:

- 1) In its original form the Rotunda was begun as a mausoleum for Emperor Constantine the Great, in 322-3, when this emperor is known to have briefly resided in Thessaloniki.
- 2) Because of Constantine's changed plans, the construction of his new mausoleum, dedicated also as a church of the Holy Apostles in his new capital, Constantinople, the Rotunda was probably completed, but left undecorated and without a specific function.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 576 (Olympiados street 74-76 house), p. 571-2 (Ioulianou street 18 house).

⁵⁹ Episcopal complexes have become a subject of focused attention in recent times, cf. W. Müller-Wiemer, "Bischofsresidenzen des 4.-7. Jhs. Im östlichen Mittelmeer-Raum," *Actes du XIe Congrès international d'archéologie chrétienne* (Paris, 1989), v.1, pp. 651-701; also papers by Duval, Sodini, Picconillo, and Uberti, in the same volume.

⁶⁰ For Poreč see: A.R. Terry, "The Architecture and Architectural Sculpture of the Sixth-Century Euphrasian Cathedral Complex at Poreč," Ph.D. Diss. University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign (1984), pp. 101-31 ("The Bishopric"); for Louloudies see: E. Marki, "Σταυροειδής κτίριο της (προκατασκευής) της 5ης Εποχής; Βασιλική/Αγγο-Βασιλική;" *Το ἀρχαιολογικό έργο στη Μακεδονία και Θράκη* 10-Α (1996), esp. pp. 239-43.

⁶¹ Theoharidou (as in En. 55), pp. 5-6. The text is insufficiently clear in its implications and, therefore, itself is a subject to different interpretations.

⁶² Ibid., p. 5.

3) An earthquake in January 363 may have damaged the building and left it in a semi-ruinous state for a few decades.

4) Repaired, modified in its design, and substantially enlarged by the addition of an ambulatory, it was converted into a Christian church, most likely by Emperor Theodosius I, in the 390s.

5) In the course of the sixth century, owing to the special circumstances effecting the city's original cathedral, the Rotunda may have taken over this role, acquiring at this time a new ambo, a baptistery, and an episcopal residence.

6) Extensive repairs resulting from major earthquake damage, believed to have taken place in the course of the seventh century, may have actually occurred in the course of the ninth century instead. In the aftermath of these, and certainly before 904, the function of the cathedral must have returned to the church of Hagia Sophia.

In this paper I have aimed at demonstrating the extent to which historical questions can be subject to broadest contextual analyses. Architecture, as a form of cultural expression, all too often is treated as a separate enterprise within the larger framework of historical studies. Such disciplinary divisions, while possibly understandable on account of the entrenched traditions in our educational systems, are most unfortunate in practice, particularly in contexts where hard historical facts are generally lacking, and where every available bit of evidence may prove helpful in reconstructing a larger picture. Thus, I strongly believe that our eyes and our minds must remain alert and open to *every type of evidence* that may become available. Where historical documents remain silent or confusing, it is our responsibility to animate other potential resources in an ongoing struggle to better understand historical phenomena.

The history of Early Christian Thessaloniki is yet to be written. As its major monuments continue to be studied, attention must be drawn to the growing need to keep the larger context in sharp focus. As our specialized knowledge grows rapidly through the results of different disciplines, it is imperative to constantly correlate the emerging new results. Without such rigor, the total picture we desperately seek will continue to elude us. Even if the reconstruction of the total picture has to be admitted as an impossible task, the work on the sharpening of its partial image must remain our primary consideration. In this process - and a process it is - we must recognize that definitive partial answers are generally difficult, if not impossible to arrive at in isolation, and often have a blurring general effect. Valid questions, and tentative hypotheses - if posed as such - can be invaluable, and should have an important place, stimulating the thinking and inviting new ideas and ways of looking at problems, therefore contributing to the process I have alluded to. The task is a complex one and can only benefit from the broadening of the base of investigation and the freedom of communication among individuals dedicated to the common task of trying to better understand the past.



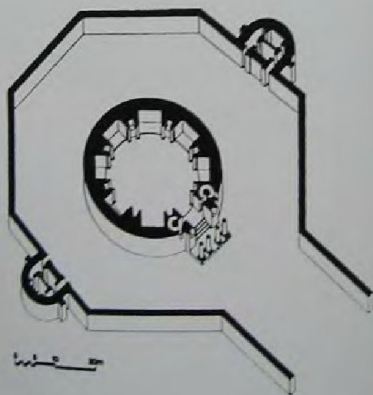
1. Rotunda, Aerial view (Ephoreia of Byzantine Antiquities, Thessaloniki)



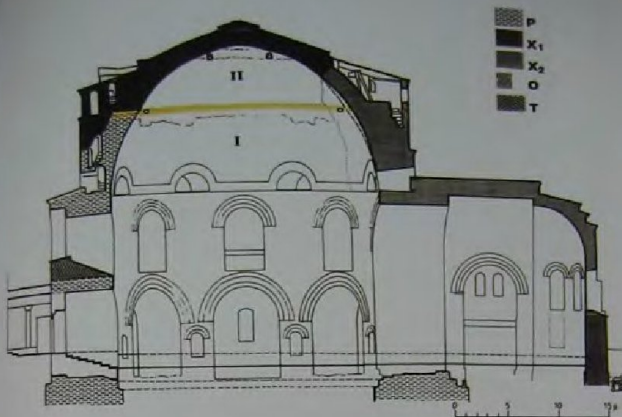
2. Rotunda, General view, from south-east (Ephoreia of Byzantine Antiquities, Thessaloniki)



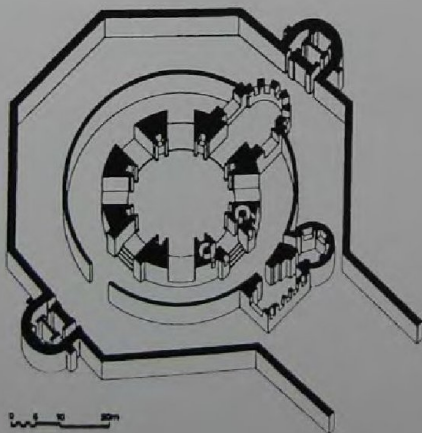
3. Rotunda, View of interior from above (Author)



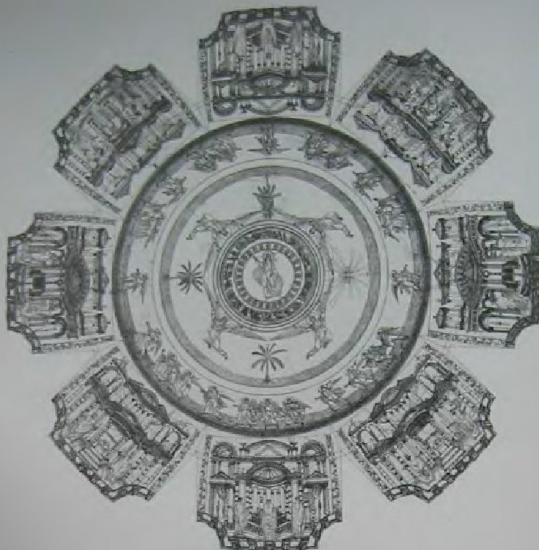
4. Rotunda, Original form, axonometric (Author, delineated by J. Kelly)



5. Rotunda, Longitudinal section (K.Theocharidou)



6. Rotunda, Church conversion, axonometric (Author, delineated by J. Kelly)



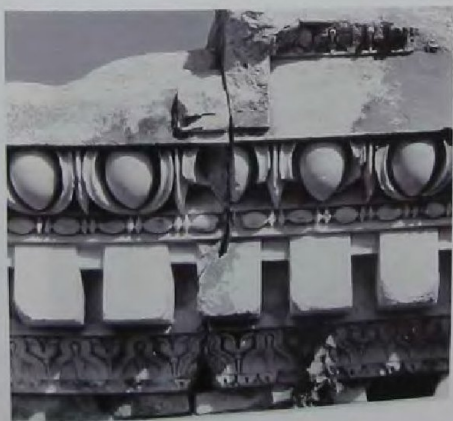
7. Rotunda, Dome, mosaic program, drawing (M. Korres)



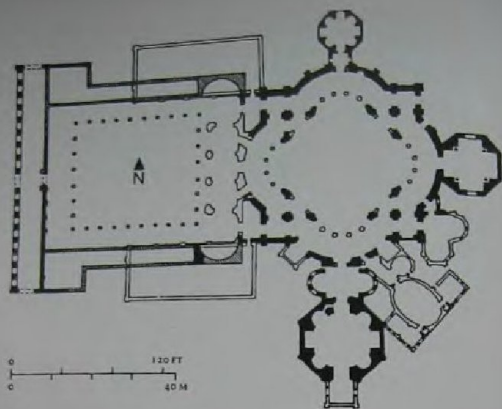
8. Rotunda, Dome mosaics, section of lowest zone (Photo Lykides)



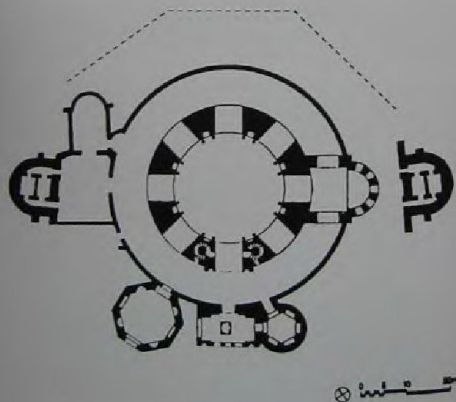
9. Rotunda, Detail of mosaic 'pseudo-cornice'
(Ephoreia of Byzantine Antiquities, Thessaloniki)



10. Corinthian frieze, detail (J.-P. Adam)



11. Milan, S. Lorenzo, plan (R. Krautheimer)



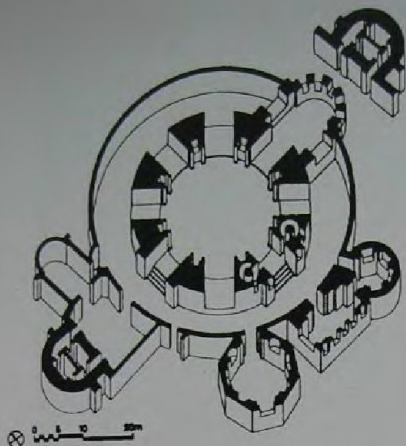
12. Rotunda, Church phase, plan (Author, delineated by J. Kelly)



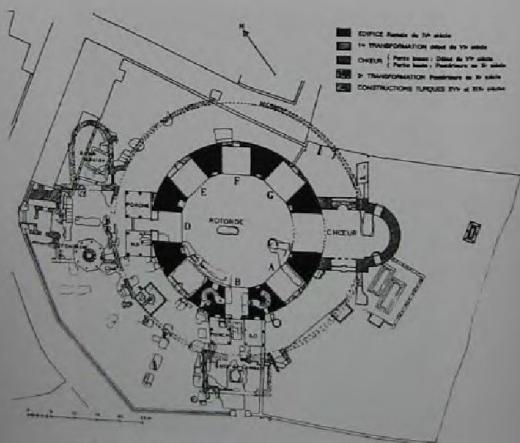
13. H. Sophia, Capital with wind-blown leaves
(Ephoreia of Byzantine Antiquities, Thessaloniki)



14. H. Sophia, Basket capital
(Ephoreia of Byzantine Antiquities, Thessaloniki)



15. Rotunda, Cathedral phase, axonometric (Author, delineated by J. Kelly)



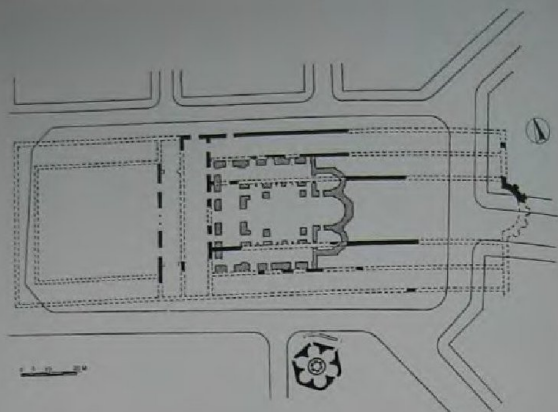
16. Rotunda, plan showing excavated remains (G. Hébrard)



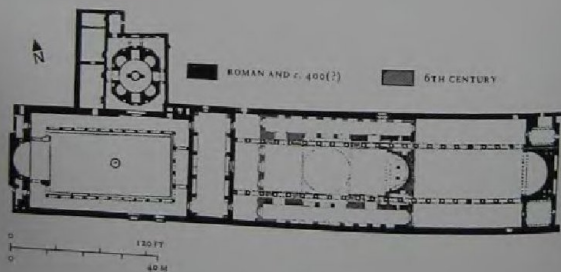
17. Rotunda, Baptismal font (?) (Ephoreia of Byzantine Antiquities, Thessaloniki)



18. Rotunda, Baptismal font (?) (Author)



19. H. Sophia, Fifth-century and present church, plan (E. Hadjitryphonos)



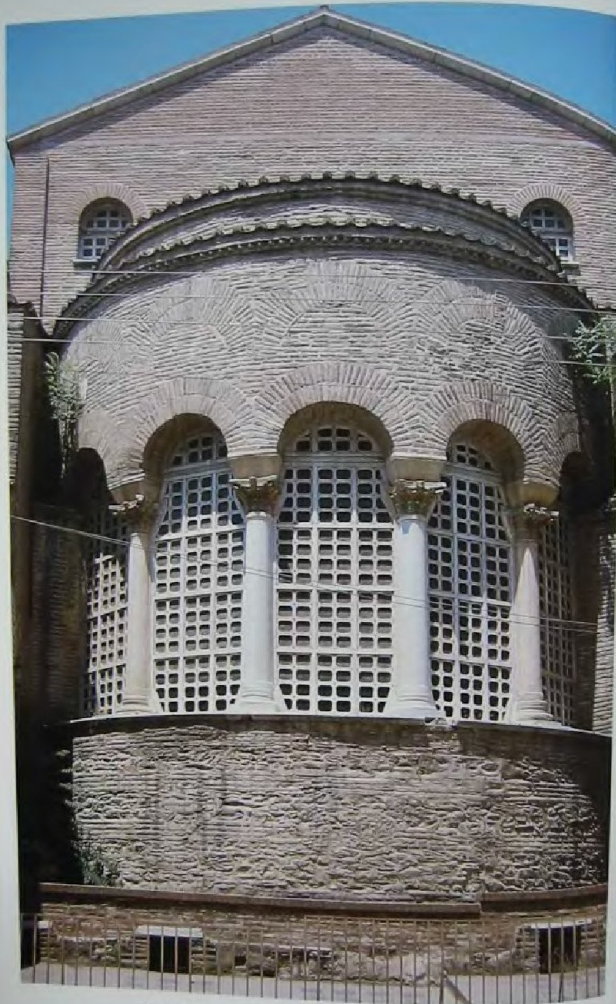
20. Ephesos, church of the Theotokos, plan of two churches (R. Krautheimer)



21. H. Sophia, East façade, general view (Author)



22. Constantinople, H. Eirene, East façade, general view (Author)



23. H. Demetrios, Main apse, exterior, gen view (Author)



24. H. Sophia, Dome, exterior (Author)



25. Constantinople, H. Eirene, Dome (Author)



26. H. Sophia. Dome, exterior detail, from north-east (Author)



27. Acheiropoietos, Apse, exterior detail (Author)



28. Rotunda, East elevation with phases indicated (K. Theocharidou)



29. Rotunda, Apse, exterior, general view (Author)



30. Rotunda, Bema, exterior, south flying buttress (Ephoreia of Byzantine Antiquities, Thessaloniki)



31. Rotunda, Bema, exterior, north flying buttress (Author)



32. Rotunda, South flying buttress, spoils used in construction (Author)



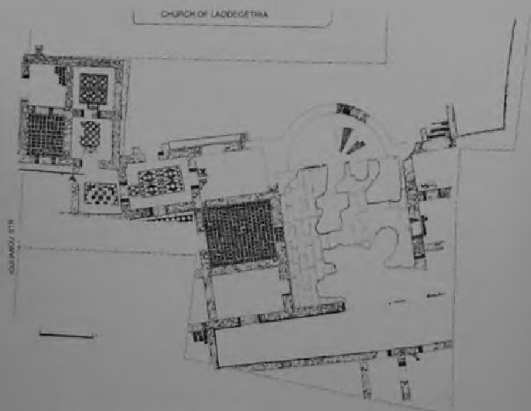
33. Rotunda, Conch of main apse, Ascension fresco
(Ephoreia of Byzantine Antiquities, Thessaloniki)



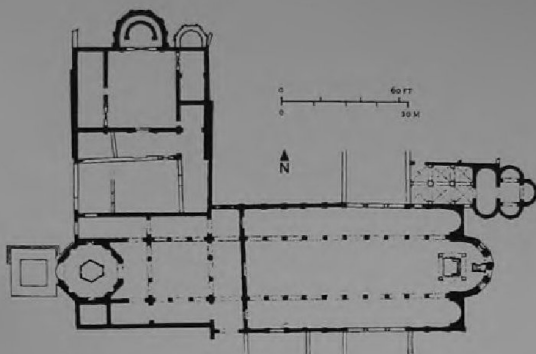
34. Rotunda, North flying buttress, spoils in used construction (Author)



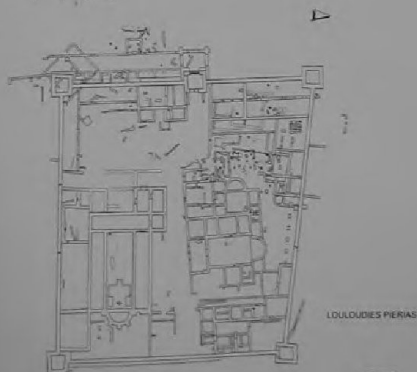
35. Olymbiados st. 74-76, house, plan (Ephoreia of Byzantine Antiquities, Thessaloniki)



36. Ioulianiou st. 18, house, plan (Ephoreia of Byzantine Antiquities, Thessaloniki)



37. Poreč (Parentium), Croatia, Cathedral complex, plan (R. Krautheimer)



38. Louloudies, Cathedral complex, plan (Ephoreia of Byzantine Antiquities, Thessaloniki)

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